

Sheaffer: My name is Emily Sheaffer, and I am interviewing Keith Michael for the Veterans History Project, part of the Library of Congress. Keith was born on October 3, 1981. He served in the United States Air Force as Technical Sergeant. This interview took place in Falling Waters, West Virginia. I am the cousin of Keith. My partner's name is Christine Wolfe. Where and when were you born?

Michael: I was born in Martinsburg, West Virginia and I was born, as you said, October 3, 1981. I was born in the City Hospital here in Martinsburg.

Sheaffer: Can you tell us a little bit about your family?

Michael: I am married to Jessica Michael, and we have been married for almost 3 years and we have a little girl named Morgan who just recently had her first birthday.

Sheaffer: What kind of job and activities were you doing before you entered the service?

Michael: I entered when I was 17, so I was still in high school. When I was in high school, I was working at the local Kmart and also a furniture place called Oakbarn.

Sheaffer: Do you have any other family members who were in the service, extended family included?

Michael: Not immediate family, extended family. Our family has had some great uncles who were drafted during World War II, including one that was drafted to be in the Army Corps that served in the Air Force portion of the Army before the Air Force became its own separate entity.

Sheaffer: Were you drafted or did you enlist?

Michael: I enlisted. It was a personal choice. I enlisted right in the middle of high school during my senior year when I was seventeen.

Sheaffer: Why did you decide to enlist?

Michael: I decided because I actually got into the Air Force Academy to go to college, but when I went out to visit, I just decided it wasn't for me. I didn't want to go out there for four years and have to be committed to active duty an additional five years afterwards, but I always had some sense of wanting to serve my country, and I wanted to get some of the benefits that came with being in the military, like school benefits, so while I was still in high school, I joined the West Virginia Air National Guard. So that's why I joined at an early age, to get help get my college paid for after high school.

Sheaffer: What was your reason for choosing the Air Force?

Michael: The Air Force is a very technical part of the military. I don't want to downplay any of the other services, like the Army or the Marines, but it's more of an infantry type of force and it's more do what you're told type. Whereas the Air Force is treated more like a business and you have a very set skills and standards that you have to follow, and that's one of the reasons I chose the Air Force. The other reason was there was an Air National Guard base right next to our house that was about five miles from where I grew up, so I grew up around air force people my entire life.

Sheaffer: Have you moved around a lot because of being in the Air Force?

Michael: I have not because I'm in the Air National Guard, so we don't have to move like active duty people. I'm stationed here and assigned to the West Virginia Air National Guard and will continue to be as long as I continue my enlistments.

Sheaffer: What rank did you start out at?

Michael: When I joined in high school, you can't be any higher than an E-1, so that's called an Air Man Basic and that's what I started out as. And right after I graduated high school I had enough scores on my ASVAB and had enough experience with my GPA that they automatically promoted me to Air Man First Class, which is E-3.

Sheaffer: How did moving up the ranks work for you?

Michael: It worked really well. I got a few enlistments below the zone, and I was able to move up the ladder very fast. I made it to my current rank, E-6, Technical Sergeant, before they did 23, which is very fast in the Air Force. Moving up the ranks was very positive of an experience for me and with that learning how to perfect my skills and also learning how to lead subordinates, I learned at a very young age and excelled at it, so it was a very good experience for me.

Sheaffer: What is the highest rank you have achieved? Please describe your job with this rank.

Michael: The highest rank I have achieved is Technical Sergeant, which is E-6, which is about middle of the road. It goes E-1 to E-9 in the Air Force, so I'm a little bit higher than half way up the enlisted rank, but just recently, two weeks ago, I was selected for an officer position, so here in the next month, I'll be combed as second Lieutenant probably, maybe even a first Lieutenant depending on how my skills are judged and everything by the selection board. I was selected to fill that rank, so that will be the highest rank I will fill here in the next month.

Sheaffer: How long did it take for you to get through your training?

Michael: It took, my initial basic training, I went and left home the beginning of July, and I didn't get home until November, so that's almost six months that I was gone. There have been

many follow-on trainings ever since then. Probably if you add them all up, probably another year to a year and a half additional training ever since then, the initial basic training. Follow on training, Iron man leadership training, NCO Academy, all would be included. Base Training as you move up the ranks, you're always in a state of learning.

Sheaffer: What was your training like?

Michael: Basic training was not fun, they like to yell at you, but it's all designed to make you perform a skilled job in a stressful environment, so you can't really take anything personally that they are yelling at you, but they are teaching you very tedious tasks and they explain everything and give you a manual that tells you exactly how to do everything. They just try to make it as stressful as possible and what it does, is it teaches you to basically perform in a war environment. Everything that happens in a war environment, bombs going off around you, machine gun fire, and you still have to perform your job, that's what basic training does. So, the training was very difficult, very stressful, especially for someone coming out of high school and having your parents do basically everything for you, to going straight into that environment was a big culture shock for me, but they teach you how to get through it and the Air Force does a very good job of that.

Sheaffer: Did you have any specialized training? If so, what?

Michael: Yes, I'm specialized as Aeromedical Evacuation Health Service Administrator Specialist, so I'm basically I get to track and monitor our AeroVac missions for Aeromedical Evacuation, so I help keep up on the flyers that fly in the back of the aircraft. I take care of the patients and get the patient's paperwork squared away. Working out with the front enders, the pilot's and aircraft commanders, make sure that our people are taken care of, what hops they are going to be making across the different locations. They are going to be stopping and picking up different patients. I have a lot of different roles I can play and it's kind of skilled in the training I have and my follow on training from basic training taught me how to do all of this.

Sheaffer: Has your position ever put you in danger?

Michael: There have been several times; this past deployment. We flew into a couple of different situations. There were two different stops in Afghanistan, one being in Kandahar where we made a stop, and we had an indirect fire attack as soon as we landed. We had to evacuate the aircraft and go run to a bunker, as some of the explosions were going on around us. So that was probably some of the closest I have been to front line action that I have ever experienced myself.

Sheaffer: What was military life like for you?

Michael: Military life is a little bit different than being at home. It's learning your place and knowing where you fit at in your organization and being able to take orders and instructions from those appointed above you. You are constantly having to trust and lean on people who have

been assigned above you and you have to learn that even though you might not think you are doing it right you need to trust the people that are ahead of you. As long as it's within regulation and within code, so it's not where you're leading your own life. Sometimes it's being dictated to you, so it's an adjustment. Especially for someone like myself who's not in military life all the time, coming from civilian life to military life, flipping back and forth can have it's issues.

Sheaffer: Where have you served?

Michael: I've served in Germany; I've served in a country called Qatar; I've served in Andrews Air Force Base, Scotts Air Force Base in Illinois, and Travis's Air Force Base out in California.

Sheaffer: What was your trip like to get to those places?

Michael: The most difficult was obviously all the way into the Middle East. It's a very long trip. The military does a very good job of scheduling rotator missions, so we actually fly on commercial flights all the way into where we are going and just a long flight. We flew seven hours to Ireland and then an additional seven hours from Ireland down into the Middle East, so it was back to back and as soon as we got there, we started running right away and working, so it was kind of hard to adjust to the time difference and traveling for that long. In most cases, all my travels with the Air Force have gone very smooth.

Sheaffer: What was a regular day like while you were serving?

Michael: While over there, we worked six days a week, six of the seven, we worked twelve hour shifts, so we would get up early in the morning. I worked seven to seven, I would get up at six, walk to the bathrooms. There are no bathrooms nearby, so you have to walk to every bathroom. They call them cadillacs over there. You would go to the cadillac just like in normal life, get ready, put your uniform on, and then you'd either, they had a transport bus to get us to work or we had a few vehicles so we would kind of carpool together to get us to where our work center was. We would go to our work center and start jumping in on it. Taking care of whatever that day's missions were.

Sheaffer: Did you witness any action there?

Michael: I wouldn't say I witnessed any action being Aeromedical. We're constantly moving patients away from the action, and by the time they get to us, they've usually been Medivac'd by the army so they're off the front lines, so for the most part Aerovac is off the front lines. There is a package in Aerovac called AELT. They're a liaison team to the Army, so they're a little bit for, what they do is call back to Aerovac and say hey this is the expected load of how many patients we're expecting today. They're a little bit more on the front lines, but I've never served in that position, so I wouldn't say that I've ever served on the front lines.

Sheaffer: What kind of duties did you have away from the front line? Please describe them.

Michael: My duties were, duty controller, so that's tracking and monitoring all the Aerovac missions, the flights in and out; I've also served as the unit deployment manager, which was my last deployment where I was in charge of making sure all our assigned personnel got in and out of the theatre and tracking their travel in and out and also their emergency management, making sure they had all their proper chemical warfare gear and making sure they were prepared in case we were attacked.

Sheaffer: What kind of emotions did you have with those jobs?

Michael: Duty controller can be very stressful. Making sure your launching missions on time. It's really critical to coordinate with the front end, with the command post, with our Airvac Team, and with the patients that are coming on, so the casualties center that is going to be dropping off, the staging facilities that are going to be dropping off the patients, talking to them because we don't want to be the delay of a patient getting out of theatre. It's very critical. Some of these patients are you know, teetering on the edge of their life, you know thinking, if it's my job to make sure the aircraft is going to get off the ground if I cause it to be twenty minutes late that patients, you know, health is in my hands. So you constantly stressing and making sure you're hitting your time line, so that patient has the greatest chance of survival as possible.

Sheaffer: Have you made any friends during your deployment?

Michael: Every deployment, I've been on three. Every deployment I've made friends with people, usually, in Air National Guard. You go with a lot of people you know, but there's always a group of people you might know. I've always made good friends, long term friends that I still stay in contact with that I've never met before, and it's kind of nice. Aerovac is very small across the Air Force, so you run into a lot of the same people, so even though you might be going out the door not knowing who you're going to be deploying with you sure might really recognize or have been deployed with these people before. So I've always had a close knit of friends and made new friends while on all the deployments I've been on.

Sheaffer: What kind of communication did you have with your family during deployment?

Michael: Most deployments would be phone conversations until recently. This past deployment I got to use Skype a lot, so I was able to video teleconference with my wife and Morgan. That was really good, but sometimes it made it harder too, seeing them all the time and not only that, but the internet connection we had over there wasn't always the greatest. It was frustrating sometimes because you'd get time to go Skype and you'd sit down and you'd plan a time and the internet was so spotty that Skype would break down and not work. So sometimes it was just easier to call and you know, Jess and I would usually did it once a week because it was kind of hard if you stayed too much in contact, and it made it hard to be away. Sometimes you just have to focus in on the job, and you know that you're going to be gone a set period of time and you're coming home and just getting through that, so it was just easier to have a scheduled time once a week for us to talk.

Sheaffer: What kind of activities did you do during your time off during deployment?

Michael: Surfing the internet most recently, trying to skype when we can, working out. I worked out two hours a day when I was over there. Air Force is big on getting into shape and getting everyone healthier, and so I found focus in on that. They also had a movie theater there, so I went and watched a movie about once or twice a week. They brought in performers for us, so getting to see someone famous every once in awhile for free that was enjoyable, and then of course eating and going to the chatwalk. That would be the times that I spent away from work.

Sheaffer: What is the goal of Operation Enduring Freedom?

Michael: Operation Enduring Freedom is to ensure that America is staying safe from terrorists. So, Enduring Freedom is any activities inside the United States and outside the United States that is protecting us from future terrorist attacks. So, it's taking the war to the enemies out there for us to describe them. So, Enduring Freedom is making sure that the freedom is protected in the United States because we're over seas fighting and taking the war to the terrorists where they live and everything and making sure that they don't have a chance to organize and ever evoke another 911 on to us I'm sure.

Sheaffer: Please describe your most recent deployment with the 379 Expedition Aeromedical Evacuation Squadron?

Michael: I was deployed with the Aerovac Command Cell there 379 it was in the Middle East there. I was deployed for 120 days. We were there for a little bit longer than that. Till you got your transportation in and out it was about 134 days that I was actually in the country there. It was a very good experience. I always say that deployments are all about the people who you are deployed with, and I was deployed with a very good intelligent group this time. I went with my home station commander. He was my commander over there. I was the unit deployment manager, so I was in charge of getting everyone in and out and helped us get over there and once over there I helped get all the other units that we had assigned into our country and I also was in charge of getting them home as well. I was very busy the entire time cycling people in and out, but I did enjoy my job. It was just hard being away from my family.

Sheaffer: What was it like being apart of the 775 Expedition Aeromedical Evacuation Flight?

Michael: There I was the duty controller; I was a senior duty controller at that location that was Andrew's Air Force Base. There at Andrew's we moved a lot of patients. It's the second largest hub for Aerovac next to Germany. So, every single patient that is injured overseas that is stationed in the United States comes back through Andrew's. You see everything from the major injuries, to the little injuries, to mental injuries. They all come through Andrew's. Mainly the ones that really stick out in your head are the injured soldiers that have been seriously injured that are going to Walter Reed, the medical center there in the D.C. area. But as a duty controller I wasn't out on the flight lines too much. I was more planning the missions, mission paperwork, planning for crews coming in and out of that location, working with the front end and Command Post there, so and also being the Senior Duty Controller, I was in charge of the other Duty Controllers at that location.

Sheaffer: Please describe what you did.

Michael: I kind of went into it a little bit, so every single mission, air vec mission, comes with their mission paperwork. It includes the patient paperwork, where their stops are going to be, how long they're going to be at that stop, what they're going to do with those patients, who do they transport. They might be handing them off to a civilian hospital, or ambulance, or they might be dropping them off at another military installation. It also has all the patient's injuries, what they might be experiencing, and what kind of medications they are. I kind of gather all that information from a system called traces. Then, I'm also in charge of tracking the actual mission, the flight. That's a GDSS2 system, tracking all those missions and working out what times those missions will take off, alerting our crews, telling them what time they're going to be taken off, who they're going to be working with, how long their flight is, how many cuts they're having. You're constantly coordinating, you're kind of like the middle man between the front man and the air crew, making sure it's a smooth transition, making it as easy on the crew as possible and making it as easy on the patient as possible.

Sheaffer: Please explain what you did with the 167th Aeromedical Evacuation Squadron.

Michael: That's my home station air vac. I've been with them for a little over twelve years now. That's the unit I enlisted in initially out of high school. They're stationed out of Martinsburg, West Virginia. When I first joined, they were a C130 unit. Now they're a C5 unit. There I have worked my rank up from E1 to E6 now. I was just selected as the officer that's going to be up in the medical clinic there. So, I've had a lot of experience with the 167th. Right now I'm currently the NCOIC, in charge of the orderly room, and also I'm the functional area-training manager. So, I'm in charge of the training plans for all the medical admin for that section, and also I'm in charge of all the documentation that the orderly room is charged with throughout the year. Making sure that that gets done, and for the people that work underneath me, making sure that they're staying on task wherever they might be assigned.

Sheaffer: Can you elaborate a little bit on your first time with Operation Enduring Freedom with the 375th?

Michael: The first time I was with the 375th, I was at a Command Cell out of Andrew's Air Force Base. The P stands for provisional, so it was a provisional because it was a deployed unit for Operation Enduring Freedom. The 375th is an actual unit out of Scott Air Force Base.

So, we were the provisional that was kind of attached away from them that was deployed. So, we answered back into the 375th, and we were apart of the 375th, but we were separate from them. It was kind of like they just split us away a little bit. So my experience there was I was in a command cell there, and I was the chief of all administrative functions. So, we had three locations, Andrew's Aeromedical Evacuation Operation Team, one out at Scott's Air Force Base, and the one at Travis. All their medical admin would report back in to me. They would give me their situations or reports every single day. I would roll up reports weekly to TACC, which is a group at Scott Air Force Base that monitors all Aerovac mission, assignments, and tracking for the entire world. So, I rolled all those reports up for them for oversight, so they could plan in the future how many people needed to be deployed and what assists they needed out in the field. Also with that job I got to travel to those three locations, and stop in there. It was kind of fun getting to see what each location did, and my involvement with each.

Sheaffer: Describe the reactions in the event of you coming home.

Michael: Coming home, as always, you know each time it has been a little bit different. First time I came home, I was single so it wasn't a big deal. It was just kind of filtering back into normal life. I came back to my parent's house. The second time I was deployed I had just recently been married, so that was trying to get adjusted back to my wife and everything. So prepping for that was you know, making sure I got adjusted to being a husband again. It's not like I wasn't a husband while I was gone, but it's different when you actually live with someone.

The third time was coming home to my wife and a newborn. So, that was a big adjustment, going from working six days a week and working twelve hour days and focusing really on me coming home to a family that needed me to help provide emotionally, spiritually, financially again. So, getting myself mentally prepared for that and mentally prepared to not just worry about me, but worry about others as well. Each time has a little bit mental preparedness to come home, but I've adjusted pretty well in all three cases.

Sheaffer: How long do you plan on serving?



Michael: Right now I have a little over twelve years, and since I just got this officer position, I have to have at least ten more years to retire as an officer. So, I'll be in at least ten more years. So, till I go through my training and everything, we're probably looking at least twenty-three years. I'll probably have in it before I'm even thinking about retiring. I'm watch you call a lifer, so I'm in until I retire.

Sheaffer: Will you be deployed again?

Michael: Chances are pretty good that I'll get deployed again. If I stayed in air vac, which I'm not now because I got this new position I probably would have been probably be deploying here in another 15 months. With my new position and with the training, I'm not sure when the next time I'll be deployed, but chances are pretty good that I'll deploy at some point.

Sheaffer: Can you describe this new position a little bit?

Michael: The new position is a medical service core officer. I'll be in charge of medical readiness and e-meds. So, it's a little bit different than aero vac. It's more of taking care of patients while they're on the ground and if there is emergencies. Medical readiness is the planning part of that, making sure that that's squadron, that medical group is prepared incase there is a bomb ahead, so if there's some kind of big medical emergency that we have a plan in place to help those patients get away, to evac those patients. I think I'll have a lot of interaction with Aerovac because I come from an Aerovac background. Where I'm going, the medical group is kind of weak in that area, so I think I'll kind of be the liaison. There's a package there called the MASF, it's a mobile air staging facility, and what they do is they take those injured patients that happened on the front lawns, and keep them staged there until there is a flight ready for them to take off. So, it's kind of like a holding area, and that's where I think that I'll really fit, in this massive package, and I'll teach them how to use the traces and GDSS2 systems that I've used in the past.

Sheaffer: Have you have had any contact with the many men and women you worked with during deployment?

Michael: I have. There's one guy that I really stay in touch with. His name is Captain Jeremy Browning. He's our Communication Officer last rotation, the one I did with the 379th. I'm an IT specialist on the outside. That's my civilian job at the Department of Veteran's Affairs. He comes from an IT background, so him and I had a lot in common. I talked to him on a professional level, but because we had so many similarities, same kind of sense of humor,

same kind of up brain, we hit it off pretty good as friends and everything. He's someone I'll probably stay in contact with for a long time.

Sheaffer: How did your experience with deployment effect your life at home?

Michael: My experiences with deployment, they, you know while you're gone and everything you learn to appreciate little things: good meals, having a bathroom close by. So, what it does is it really gets you to mentally think about the things that you worry about and the things that you get upset about at home, stop getting upset about the real little things in life and really enjoy and take advantage of what we have here in America. So, the deployments have really put a value on the small things in life, and it's allowed me to not lose my temper and get upset over the little things that I used to.

Sheaffer: What life lessons did you learn that were very important to you?

Michael: Value of family. Value of, you know, like I said before, the small things here in life, the things we have here as Americans that we probably should take advantage of more and really, you know, just the right to religion. While I was over in the Middle East, they said they had freedom of religion, but they don't. They have the Muslim religion. The Muslim religion is it basically, and you get persecuted otherwise. So, having that freedom of religion here in the United States of practicing what you want and being able to go to church and being able to do and say and practice what you want to practice is a real treat here, a real freedom. Freedom of speech, these are all things you know you need to take advantage of as being an American.

Sheaffer: Please describe the awards that you have received for your service.

Michael: I received several of awards. Including one that's kind of pending right now, which would be one of my largest accomplishments and that's the Air Force Commendation Medal. So, there's a package and it hasn't been officially approved and signed yet, but a package was submitted on my last rotation. Also, the War on Terrorism medal, the Expeditionary Global War on Terrorism, the Expeditionary Deployed medal, the one where I was activated for being a civilian Air National Guard member and to an active duty billet, and I have one Air Force Achievement medal. I have a bunch, I can't go through them all in my head right now. You know, I don't do my job for the medals or anything. Recognition is nice and appreciated, but you know, you did it for the people around you, and in my career field you do it for the patients that you serve and everything. The awards and stuff that come with it. Those are nice and they're just tapped on, but it's the feeling of doing a good job that's the true reward.